



## **Diploma and college degree for high schoolers?**

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If things go as planned, Rockingham County Schools will join several communities in the state to revolutionize the traditional high school experience.

At April's meeting, the Rockingham County school board approved an application for a planning grant to study a possible Learn and Earn Early College High School in the county. If plans move forward, an early college high school could open in 2008.

Learn and Earn schools are partnerships involving K-12 systems and public and private two- and four-year colleges. Teens study for five years, instead of the traditional four. But teens completing school receive both a high school diploma and an associate's degree from a community college - or two years of college credit toward a bachelor's degree. All at no cost for the student.

With the help of an \$11 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the N. C. New Schools Project was created to reinvent the high school concept. Several alternative high schools were created as part of the initiative, including learn and earn and themed and redesigned high schools.

The project has resulted in 57 new schools, including 34 early college high schools, in the hope of creating up to 100 high schools by 2008.

Dr. Rodney Shotwell, superintendent, and the school board discussed the idea before formally applying for the grant. Shotwell helped plan the Macon County Early College High School.

"The biggest difference is it only takes one adult at a high school to keep kids coming back," Shotwell said.

Class sizes range from 20 to 25 students, said Geoff Coltrane, research and communication director at NCNSP. But each early college is allowed a maximum of 400 students - about 100 students per grade.

Coltrane agreed that small classes are key in creating a bond from teacher to teacher, student to student and teacher to student across all disciplines.

"In a regular high school, if a student is struggling in English or science, the teachers don't talk to each other about the student," Coltrane said.

Most of the early college high schools opened this school year, so it will be few years before the schools are measured. According to an NCNSP principle, putting an early college high school on a college campus "is integral to student motivation and success .... It is a visible symbol to the community of dual accountability for student outcomes and academic success."

Shotwell hopes to hear whether the schools received the grant by the end of June. The grant, about \$45,000, would allow administrators from the schools and the community college to plan curriculum, set schedules and visit early college high schools around the country, Coltrane said.

The early college high schools are characteristic of traditional high schools but typically have first-generation college students from low-income, minority families.

"The idea is to put them on a path to get six years' of work in five," Coltrane said.

Students can get a diploma and a degree in as little as four to five years because of dual enrollment. For example, a college Introduction to English class could cover high school and college language requirements. Some students start taking college-level classes in ninth grade; others wait until they are high school juniors.

Shotwell said parents worry about how they will pay for college, but students in the early college high school can take care of two years of college at no cost to the family. Students are given textbooks, but students may be required to buy other supplies.

A few additional staff members are required for an early college high school, including a liaison provided by the state to smooth potential policy barriers. Because teachers are assigned based on average daily attendance, some might be redirected to teach at the new school.

"The students know what they're getting into," Coltrane said. "The experience is going to be different both for the students and teachers."

Popular early college high schools have instituted lottery systems, while other schools require a formal application and interview process.

High expectations and a rigorous curriculum are placed on students at the start of ninth grade. Coltrane said that targeting underachieving students as freshmen may sound unproductive, but students at-risk of dropping out are now finding a place to challenge them.

"It's helping those who may fall through the cracks to not only succeed but to thrive," Coltrane said.

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